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### Sudden Fortune

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SUDDEN FORTUNE  
By  
LEHUANANI MARIE SHELTON

B.S. English, Appalachian State University, Boone, North Carolina, 2000

Professional Paper

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

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in English, Creative Writing

The University of Montana  
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Approved by:

Perry Brown, Associate Provost for Graduate Education  
Graduate School

Prageeta Sharma, Chair  
Department of English

Debra Magpie Earling  
Department of English

Hipólito Rafael Chacón  
Department of Art

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## Dedication

This collection is dedicated to Maria Flores and Julep Josephina. May I always feel your protection and love.

# **Sudden Fortune**

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PART I. THE MAINLAND, MONTANA.

mynananbiha, before dying.  
soon it is happening, she says.  
(she sits on an overturned bucket in the shade of the concrete house)  
soon it is happening.  
(blotchy swollen legs, a taracteye at the bend of breadfruit trees)  
ai'adai, she says. who will take care of my flowers?  
(hibiscus big as plates, Bougainvillea at a tumble of heartbursts)  
she says, for heaven's gracious. the sun is bleeding into the sea.

[illegible]



iknewaboyonce  
whowasmissing  
aneyeye.thesee-  
ingonewasthe  
colorofkelp,  
thefalseone  
algae.hewas  
lovedbyallfor  
hismarksman's  
skill(aflight-  
lessbirdatone-  
hundredpaces,  
squarebetween)  
thoughirecall  
mostthiscasual  
useof"half-breed"  
inenglishclass  
adaywhenthe  
radiatorsstank  
ofpiss,hissing.  
iwascounting  
cardinalsonthe  
limb,enoughto  
formawound.

national archives and records administration.  
frequently asked questions:  
can citizens in u.s. territories  
vote for president?  
no, the electoral college system  
does not provide for....  
unless citizens in u.s. territories  
have official residency (domicile)  
in a u.s. state....  
note that prior to the adoption of the  
twenty-third amendment, U.S. residents  
could not vote in the presidential  
election.



un-inc.

my mother flashes a foot tattoo,  
as a single pen pricked dot gone green  
gray.

i'd like to think  
she hates the mark though i've  
never known her to hate the boy  
let loose a pen, planted it there,  
back in a school room where  
english was favored where  
white grammar (the american kind)  
she learned to unlearn her kind.  
the Chamorro boy has a spanish name  
(praiseworthy)  
he let loose a fountain  
pen during exercises in objectivity  
as in i versus you  
in i recognize you.  
reversed, the implied is the same  
(unspoken you).  
accidentalsshe says.  
it landed true the  
pen tip a perfect prick sunk deep like a

flagpole.  
she was wearing no shoes she  
walks with that foot on the mainland  
far from the island

a small mole of tattoo in the sea  
of her brown foot skin penning a place.  
the boy's name flores or cruz.

## The Typewriter

Dear Atti,

Don't lose yourself here  
in all this rat-a-tat-ta  
pping. Don't. Your heart  
is out there but. Would  
you clutch it in your fi  
st just to hold on to so  
mething? Would you cast  
it or bury it in coals?

Love,  
Atti



Dear Racquel,

Let's talk about this. Your things are still here and yet. The cupboards are bare. I would extinguish all aching between us if.

You say you have no room left for me. "Your world of two. There's only room for you. In your world..." Remember that ditty?

I'll be frank. I am here drinking again. Punching through the paper with each little prick. I drink to drown (that floating ache). 'Til my heart needs gills. Tapping to remember memories.

Here's a good one:

I held your face in my hands the first time I kissed you. I asked your permission, which you thought was "precious." Our husbands were upstairs playing guitars. Emilio. And yours. The wind hemmed the house. I said I was a little embarrassed but wanted to be at least forthcoming. I spelled it all out between sips of shitty tequila. A, I said. This will work out one of two ways. A). You recoil, friendship ends.

B). You are flattered, friendship continues but of course is strained. Then-and this is my favorite part by far, by far. You say,

What about "C."

Your lips were the curve of a cranberry only. Sweet.

Now you leave traces of us on the window sill. Feathers or a curl of leaf. I sift through your necklaces and finger this grief. When.

Love,  
Atti

Dear Atti,

list and list and list  
and list and list and  
list and list and list  
but find yourself lung  
less so wonder what it  
must be that draws air  
for you. the pigeons i  
n the square flapped a  
dirty shuffle and ther  
e you were, little hea  
rt. bringing crumbs. t  
oday, eat more than wa  
ter and try to dream l  
ess. no one's going to  
take care of you now b  
ut you. take care. do.

Love,  
Atti

Dear Atti,

listen. all around the  
sound of bells. where  
must they. come from.  
there are no churches  
here. at least none y  
ou seek. empty glasse  
s.

Love,  
Atti



Dear Racquel,

I found your journal. One of them. In the pages, you and me. Sometimes you and me. One time you. me. I thought to myself, how vague. This you. This me. You address me. You put me in the nominative case. You address an aboutness of me. You put me in the accusative case. You address the aboutness of me about me. You put me in the dative case.

In the relatively small space of your meandering, you make me subject object in direct. What can any of this mean. Here are some of your words (Still, I list and list):

1. I know now that I cannot be without the blue of you in me.
2. Although our approach may reveal disturbance I will not regret going this distance with you.
3. I must not forget this touch of my face between your palms, the gaze of you.
4. Sometimes I sit here and think inside you.
5. Thing is, it's you holding me in sleep tonight.
6. All is for you. I love you only more and more.
7. So I sit and send you little pieces of me. The sort that let you know it's me here ever clear to you. Clean taste of snowflakes on tongue.
8. Will you keep your comprehension of my depletion when I step outside-or turn my gaze inward-I am in utter awe of your fearless tumbling through yourself for this finding. I am defeated by this touch so completely so serenely. This is how I feel you entering quietly by way of the darkest pass. Using means that only I could offer.

Eight is enough. For now. I sort and sort, looking for the shred of little red flag thrown at our loss. Did you leave this book for me purposely, or is it just another thing you forgot to take?

Love,

Atti

Dear Atti,

You must try to reinvision  
your margins here. Always  
left, up, flush. Some times  
the bottom, right, emptied.  
Today, you realize they are  
not bells. No belfry, no  
acolyte in a tower. Just  
progress delivered on the  
hem of deconstruction. Bull  
dozers in reverse. The  
beepbeep  
beepbeepbeeping an ear  
tattoo. Wood pecker finding  
the aluminum flag pole.  
Persistent in his search  
for what surely lies  
underneath. At times, you  
think it is the phone  
ringing. Is it Racquel  
calling. Is it. Is it. An  
attempt at reconnection.  
You are all wires today,  
livid in your humming  
electricity.

Love,  
Atti

Dear Racquel,

The feathers are gone from the sill. I tried to lift the window but it was sealed from the last time we painted. A wide pane trimmed in lavender. Not my favorite color, but you. So I levered the lever and place my palms on those lavender slats and. Nothing. The wind has a swirling breath, a churn that I wish I could imitate. What I wouldn't do for a tornado tongue. A hurricane lung. I'd raze and lift and turn houses to matchsticks. Riverbeds to dust. I'd give the birds something to fear. But when is a bird not cautious.

I am thinking of you as a bird today. And today you are not elegant. A hopping nuthatch, maybe. So much hollowness beneath the fluff. If I were wind I'd swallow you. To shake you up. To feel your whirl in my cheeks.

Of course, in the end, I spit you back out. You of the cheeping trill. Go on and look for sprouts. I have ripped them from the roots and laid waste. Dustbowl politics. My heart and lungs are confused today. With each other. Without you, they are mingling in the organ room, trying to fill up the space you used to claim.

I have put down the journal. For now. I can read so much into each slant of your l's. Where your hand has been, imprints of us.

I imprint here. Upon sheet upon sheet. The typewriter. No plugs. It sits on the breakfast table and waits. Clack. Tack. Tap. Tap. Tap. Tab. Tab. Ding. It is a sturdy thing. With it, I am searching.

Where. When.

In the end, I still am. saying. Come back. To me.

Love,  
Atti

Dear  
Atti,  
if  
you  
give  
your  
self  
to  
this  
little  
space  
like  
that  
between  
two  
fences,  
chain-link  
with unshearable  
grass,  
you  
will  
find  
no  
room  
to  
turn  
around.  
constriction  
of  
want  
versus  
need.  
Love,  
Atti

Dear Raquel,

I don't know why I bother tapping these things to you. Because you are gone without explanation. Without reason.

somegoddamnedspace!

This is what you need. Your words. I am looking at a postcard I meant to give you. Michael Heizer's "Double Negative." A shoveled out gap in the

desert.

We look at each other across this great gulf. The imaginary line of travel from trench to trench was my way of speaking to you. How to tell you this now. Should I bother.

Love,  
Atti

dear Atti, you cannot help yourself. you glut for love. and cocktail  
onions. they provide astringency. two in a glass, like blind eyes  
roving. see? no birds today. the ledge empty. love, Atti

Dear Racquel,

It has been two weeks and one and one-half day. Still this breathlessness.

I ventured out yesterday, beyond the front door. Walked a few tenuous steps toward the city. I had run out of everything. Even cocktail onions. The weather was oatmeal and cold. Typical Northwest. Where are you now. I imagine you've run to Colorado, or someplace like that, looking for something you could not find in me. A lovescape more grand.

The necklaces I have been sleeping with, two each wound around a wrist, are blue beads with driftwood twigs in a bundle. These are not yours. I realized this in a nauseating moment when the vodka ran out. They are mine. I remember making them last summer after our Baja vacation. "Our Baja Vacation." Absurdities.

I thought you. I thought your necklaces. Yours because I am always thinking you.

I put them in the bathroom drawer. The one that holds the rounded hairbrush and that fine yarn. A disaster waiting, I know.

A white-headed pigeon was perched on the window ledge, and when I got back from the convenience store because I didn't make it to the grocer, I opened the door, and the bird saw me and took flight. I thought, rock dove. This is what they are called. Did you know. A dove that perches on rocks or a dove that looks like a rock or a rock-hearted dove. I.

I. Knew this was some sign. You have flown and are perched in a loft of a railway cabin outside of Denver with the dry, woodstove heat swirling invisible currents over your doveness.

Some man is surely there with his hands. Unfounded insult. But the worst I can imagine. Somehow I think you are tied, still, to the life of men. We both had husbands. Yes. Before. But we maneuver so differently in their absence.

I need to be rid of these. Images.

Love,  
Atti

Dear Atti,

Here's show you will put it all together. Your life is a string of leavings. Embedded within is an idea of return. (But what if there's nothing to return to). Wrap yourself up in this sense of emergency. Find your other mouth. The one that needs nothing but words. Steely yourself against this loss. Because you cannot force her. You cannot even "let her leave" because, really, you have no choice. You are out of control, the room spinning, the rug pulled out, your heart bobbing in a vast sea. All the metaphors for lonely. Okay. Okay. You must think of a way. To begin again. Go to the beginning of yourself and define so you can re-define. All in good time. Pace yourself, dear.

Love,  
Atti



Dear Raquel,

It has been many days since I have approached this page. The others previous are stacked neatly by the typewriter itself. A measurement. Of what.

I am pulling myself together fragment at a time. Through the window, I see the cars drive by the slatted fence. I know they are whole, with doors and wheels and a trunk. But my eyes still have to imagine it in the passing. This is me. What I know of myself.

I have started walking.

There are no traces left of you here, dear, save for the small stack of letters I have punched out. I will pry open the lavender window tomorrow and cast them out to the street. I no longer keep track of the birds. Their feathers are not tied to my heart, which I imagine has grown scales, the buds of fins.

You, so birdlike. I list and float. That is misery, of course. To be in the vast ocean with half-hearted lungs. Trying to relax and drift. The blurry horizon bending and bending.

Tomorrow. A crowbar. The window and then a walk.  
I will return to this perfunctory machine and this clean, white sheet.  
8.5 by 11. A readymade space.

I will return to what my puffing organs bid me to do. Create.  
Write. Do.

Keep going. Keep going. Keep going.

My fish heart hung. Oh, the loss of you.

Love,  
Atti

## Reticulation

Several men and one woman are ripping up the roads outside my house. For nearly two months now, my usually quiet neighborhood has been disrupted by the sound of low-grade emergency: the rumble of bulldozer tracks on asphalt, the scrape of the huge metal buckets on the same, and the incessant beeping of machines that apparently function primarily while in reverse. Is there progress to be made in this?

The beeping is what has gotten under my skin. Or rather, it is what has gotten into my bloodstream. Perhaps it is because the beeping corresponds to the exact cadence of my own alarm clock, the digital, beeping box that sits on my bedside table, mornings abused. And perhaps the cadence of my heartbeat at rest is a half-beat slower than that of the alarm clock. Someone with a marketing degree knows this. The heart: Keep going. The clock: Get up. The bulldozer: Pay attention.

I first bought the alarm clock—a Timex with a large, rectangular blue snooze button on top—when I was just eighteen. I had a difficult time waking up then, no matter the hour. Prior to the blue-buttoned Timex, I owned a clock radio that tuned only to one station. I disliked this station, which played country music. It's not that I dislike country music—or that I dislike all country music. It's that I do not like the particular style of country music this radio station broadcast—rockytonk, countrypop, rockabilly. Then again, if I had to make a general statement about country music in regards to my preferences, I would have to state that in general, I do not like country music.

Country music is the background music of my childhood. In *The Pearl*, John Steinbeck refers to such background music. He calls it the Song of the Family. Juana is a character who lives in a hut by the ocean with her husband Kino and her infant son, Coyotito, whose ill-fated

life is riddled with scorpions and pearls. The doctor is white. Juana and Kino and Coyotito are not. The doctor gets fat on hot chocolate and sweets.

I did not grow up in a hut, but rather an A-frame my father built. The A-frame was near the ocean. I can't say "by the ocean," because, in truth, it did not sit directly next to the water. But we lived on an island—a tiny island—so the water could not have been far, no matter where we lived.

I have no husband or infant son, though I almost had a husband—once—but he turned into something else all of a sudden, or else I did.

I can recall the Song of My Family. For Juana, it was the sound of corncakes cooking in the morning, the baby gurgling in his hanging box, Kino stirring on the sleeping mat. I have never heard the sound of cooking corncakes, but I could easily imagine it.

Actually, now that I enumerate the dissimilarities of my narrative and Juana's narrative, I am finding there are perhaps more similarities than I would have guessed. If I were to make a chart of these similarities versus dissimilarities, it would look like this:

CHARACTERISTICS	JUANA	ATTI
Female	Yes	Yes
Mother/Wife	Yes	No
Powerful	Yes	Yes
Powerless	Yes	Yes
Entangled	Yes	Yes
Lived by the sea	Yes	Yes
Is wary of sudden fortune	Yes	Yes

I am sure that I could continue, adding more and more similarities to the chart, but I am not sure this would be necessary or enlightening. I wanted to make a chart, perhaps because I am drawn to organization and order, but now that I see the similarities far outweigh the dissimilarities, it would have been just as, if not more effective to simply make a one-sentence list, as in: Juana and I are alike in that we are both powerful, female residents of the seaside who are at times rendered powerless, perhaps because of our unnamed entanglements and wariness of possible sudden fortunes. However, I would then need to add a second sentence, illustrating our differences: Juana and I are different in that she is a mother and I am not. The two sentences in tandem, though succinct, do not give me the same amount of satisfaction, however, as the chart does, and I think the difference is the grid.

\_\_\_\_\_ is an artist I know little about, except that she too liked grids. The fact that I cannot remember her name does not mean that I do not admire her work (the names of which I also cannot remember). I watched a short documentary video about her once, the name of which has escaped me, and what I gleaned from it is this:

\_\_\_\_\_ spent her whole artistic life searching for something, something that contained an answer to her own satisfaction in art making. She hung around some quite famous art types (again, the names?) and learned from them and conversed with them, and then, if I remember correctly, she decided one day to simply simplify. And what she came up with was this: the grid. Or at least, the grid came to her.

So \_\_\_\_\_ was a painter. And here's something of interest: she was not married. I feel I must illuminate this point because it is also a key detail of the documentary I remember, and I wish to remind myself of it before I forget it. \_\_\_\_\_ was neither married nor had any children, but she painted grids. Grid upon grid upon grid, eventually painting them on canvases

five feet by five feet square. This detail I recall with exactitude, because in the documentary, \_\_\_\_\_ is an old lady, living in Arizona or New Mexico, nearing the end of her life, and she commented that she had to downsize from her previous choice of using six-foot square canvases to the five-foot canvases because it had become too difficult for her, in her older years, to turn the six-foot canvases. I remember this detail so precisely because it made me think how much one foot's difference could make in the life of a lady turning into an old lady. It seemed some important marker—the singular foot.

At any rate, \_\_\_\_\_ figured out the grid, or at least figured out that it existed for her use, and she used it. In the documentary, she was shown to have a particularly steady hand—there was footage of her painting the grids on the five-foot canvases—and I marveled at how steady her hand actually was. Clearly, \_\_\_\_\_ was either a natural genius with a paintbrush, or she painted for so long that she became a genius with a paintbrush, or a combination of both: she was somewhat of a natural, but practice catapulted her abilities to the level of genius. I'm not the only one who thinks she is a genius, either. For credibility's sake, it should be stated that \_\_\_\_\_ is well known, is the object of much adoration and accolades in the visual arts community, etc.

In the culmination of what I recall of the documentary, \_\_\_\_\_ said, when asked why she did not have any children, that she had lived a hundred lives and had been a mother throughout them all. In this, her current life, she did not need that experience and simply wanted to paint. I, too, feel that I have lived, if not a hundred lives, a handful at least, and that I may or may not have been a mother during those lives. I do know that now, I am not a mother, and at thirty-one, the possibility, while not extinguished, sizzles increasingly toward the charred end of unlikely. It may also be worth repeating that \_\_\_\_\_ moved to the desert at some point in

her later life. I, too, think this will be my fate. I will not live in a neighborhood then, with houses and barking dogs surrounding me and my own barking dogs. The likelihood of road construction occurring in my neighborhood, then, would be near impossible, and therefore, too, the incessant trilling of reversing machinery.

The sound of machinery was in some ways part of my childhood Song of the Family. My father was a construction worker. Even though he worked at a jobsite, the tools of his trade eventually made it home to our small farm. Backhoes were parked in the gravel driveway as often as his work truck or the baby blue Buick Beast, my mother's car. I suppose my father could use these otherwise costly machines for free as long as he was working, so our driveway was graded more often than not, though the rains would come and soften the ground beneath the gravel and suck the tires of the work truck or Beast deep into rutted crescents, where the impressions would dry into crusted craters that would ruin four sets of shocks. Other machines made it to our home, though I'm not sure of our purported need for them. I believe, to this day, there is a large yellow crane planted in the high weeds of one of the pastures, its hook-ended cable wound tightly in its crank casing, cemented with rust. I am not sure what lofty goal my father needed the crane to reach. Perhaps he was simply satisfied with the potential ability to reach a great height or else to suspend a heavy weight from on high. I could see delighting in that—the reassurance of possibility.

As background instruments, the machines made their typical vibrations—grumble, roll, rumble, scrape, chug. But when they were at rest, they made a sound, too, one that I preferred. Not the sound of silence, which is the sound a vacuum makes when it has swallowed sound, but something softer than that contraction. A humming. The sound of metal humming quietly in the

sun, as if letting out a continuous, protracted sigh. Folded angles expanding in their fittings. The sound a thing makes when it is at rest but still bent.

The humming was constant and therefore barely noticeable, except when I paid attention. It was easier to pay attention when everything else was quiet. This situation, however, one of uninterrupted quiet, was atypical. Once, my mother pierced what would have been an atypically silent morning except for the Ditch Witch singing in the key of C in the front yard. The Ditch Witch excelled at excavation. Since our family's needs did not include that of excavating, the machine sat for a few days until it was hauled off again, presumably to a mountainside or embankment.

Inside the house, all else was quiet until my mother looked out the kitchen window, appraising the tall rows of ripening corn. It must have been summer. A fat crow landed on a stalk. He was not even eating the corn, or as far as I can tell, planning on eating the corn, though I am no crow expert. Perhaps the crow was attracted to the possibility of eating corn. Along with my mother, I was also watching the crow, and I distinctly remember thinking, though I could only have been six or seven, A crow is a creature who could easily change shape. A shapeshifter, I mean. I am not sure where I would have picked up the term shapeshifter, as I was not allowed to read any literature that even suggested witchcraft or demonization or anything devilish, of which shapeshifting would have surely been a part. Though I could not have picked it up from literature, it is possible that I heard the term from a classmate, though all my classmates were unreasonably dull, which would make that less likely. Maybe I picked it up from my sister. Yes, this is the most likely explanation. Leah would have used the word shapeshifter, being twelve at the time I was six, or thirteen if I was seven. This seems fair. Leah would have taught me the word and denied teaching it to me later, had I uttered the word in front of my mother or father,

which I did not. Which is probably why, while I was thinking, A crow is a creature who could easily change shape—a shapeshifter, my mother did not stop and gawk at my use of a demonic word but instead continued to the window with my father's .22 caliber rifle, raised the sight to her right eye, and fired right there in the kitchen, not even bothering to raise the window screen.

The crow, I thought, looked a little disappointed. Before he fell, there was a moment—the moment of realization that it was being wounded that came just before the moment of realization that he would die—when I thought it might have changed shape, given the chance. Given one more second of preparation, it might have transformed into a billow of black smoke, a husband, or a house mouse. Though if I were the crow, I would have chosen smoke over husband or house mouse any day, unless, of course, house mouse or husband were apropos to the situation, which in this case, they were not. A husband on a cornstalk is a scarecrow. A house mouse on a cornstalk is perhaps an even worse threat than a crow on a cornstalk. A house mouse on a cornstalk, up that high, would be a brave and irregular titmouse indeed. One that would pose certain threats. (I happen to know that the Latinate nomenclature for house mouse is *Mus musculus*. It looks like muscle because muscle came from mouse. That is, when muscles contract under the skin, it appears as if the rounded little hump of *Mus musculus* scampers there). My mother would have no doubt slain a house mouse as easily, if not easier, than a crow. House mice don't fly, and flying surely counts for something in terms of life's worth. I was not aware at the time, however, that my mother was capable of slaying any living creature. The assumption of her pacifism, obviously, was an immature one. As I said, I was only six or seven.

I looked at the crow before he fell, because he was looking at me when my mother fired the shot. I flinched, certainly, but I did not take my eyes off the crow. Looking back at it now, that seems perhaps unreasonable, but then again it seems reasonable enough. Though a six- or



seven-year-old might follow her mother's actions with precise, observing, sponge-like eyes, the introduction of a rifle as an extension of her mother's arm would cause those same eyes to travel to its natural, aiming, endpoint—out the window, coming to rest upon the crow. Looking at the crow who was looking at me, I sensed that he was disappointed. He gave me a look I recognized, one that I had seen my dull classmates give, one that even I might affect in the right situation.

It was a look of the realization of being caught unawares, like finding yourself being spied upon by the freckled Annie Whitcomb from above in the girl's bathroom stall during the afternoon break between snacktime and naptime, when you have just pulled from the space beneath your shirt and the small of your back under the elastic waistband of your red corduroy flarepants *Do It Yourself Magic*, a book by Ruth Chew that would be otherwise forbidden to you except in the assumed privacy of the girl's stall, which you have been sure to latch with the falling action of the little metal hook into its circular eye, the eye that is screwed into the chipped wooden panel, long ago painted seafoam green. In such a circumstance, you might feel your face transform, as if it were connected to your heart, sinking with the weight of being caught unawares. The sinking is a reaction to the rush of forethought about what this being caught means. In the flood of Oh no, I know what happens next! the heart's reflexive action is to dive, to exhale its contents and sink down to the bottom of that ruined pool of future action. Dive, submerge, be lost in the swirling shadows. The face, attached, cannot help but be tugged down with it. The effect on the wearer's face is that of the tugging look of ultimate disappointment. Not only does the wearer's face reflect the surprise of disruption, but also the darkness of certain unfolding events.

Annie Whitcomb will, of course, tell, because hers is a dull life that suggests that spying is a fine enough solution to her boredom, that witnessing someone else's less dull, more exciting,

intensely private life will in some way soothe her own dullness. The crow will, of course, die, because he has not been given the one foot of opportunity to shift shapes and save himself before the lead-tipped bullet sinks through his iridescent plumage, no doubt just immaculately preened as he perched on the telephone wire before descending on the cornstalk, whereupon my mother set out to shatter his pumping heart. I recognized the look of ultimate disappointment on his crow face, and I thought, if the crow could speak, just before he fell, he would have said to me, Be wary of sudden fortune.

I feel like neither Juana nor \_\_\_\_\_ would have shot the crow. I think because of her understanding of the grid and its uses, \_\_\_\_\_ would have looked out upon the tall cornrows and smiled at their orderliness, their green simplicity rooted in plowed lines. I do not think \_\_\_\_\_ would have seen the crow as a threat to that order, but rather as a fellow admirer of the grid. I sense that a crow prefers order. Juana would not have tempted fate with a rifle, for she was as wary of firearms as she was of pearls and likewise as wary of fortune's glimmer as of those who are hypnotized by it.

Kino, in all his husbandish muscularity, could not prevent fate.

Juana's clock was the sea, which is said to move at the pace of a heart.

## PART II. THE MAINLAND, NORTH CAROLINA.

## The Mailbox

I smeared a hot pile of dog shit around the half-moon seam of her white mailbox, making sure to cake it up beneath the handle. I had already taken care of the red metal flag and the reflective numbers—all were smudged beneath a translucent brown stain that had started to bake in the late afternoon sun. One wheel of the bicycle spun on its side at my feet. Satisfied, I peeled off the soiled, yellow kitchen gloves and tossed them in a concrete birdbath in the yard.

This was way back in Wilmington, on the salt-sticky coast of North Carolina. I had just come off the mountain with a degree and was living at the beach to start my waitressing career. It was a scorching blue Wednesday in July. I was twenty-one, and the air was hot enough to curl your hair by.

I had been out on a run—a three-miler with our dog, a go-anywhere Golden who never wanted to move faster than he reasonably could while snoring on the couch, but who couldn't stand to be left behind. Had it been just a leisurely jog, things may have turned out differently. But this was one of those self-inflicted, self-timed, masochistic runs—one that would get penned onto the calendar with red ink, a wall reminder of how much better my life was now that I could make the haul in less than half an hour.

When the Golden and I started this torturous routine, we ran our first mile in just over twenty-nine minutes. I thought of all the things people who were not in horrible shape could do in the same amount of time: run one mile, shell a palm-full of walnuts with miniature tines, have two orgasms, shower, run another mile.

By the morning of the mailbox run, I had been dragging the Golden and myself across the pavement for six months or so, every single day without fail, and had dropped forty pounds. Emilio had proposed shortly thereafter. Losing the extra weight I earned during those last two

years of college was my initial goal, though now I think it was more a matter of necessity.

Replacing addiction with addiction. Hepped up on adrenaline instead of so many other indulgences.

It had been mostly working. The Golden and I had earned our bikini bodies and no longer had to defer to the oversized beach towel when we sunned ourselves alongside the slim beauties from the nearby University. We had become sleek, sinewy. And that morning, we were on a mission to clear the straightaway from the stop sign to the yellow house at the end of the street in under two minutes flat. That's when she stopped us.

I paused the timer on my wristwatch and was running in place while the Golden took a pit stop in a culvert on the side of the road. A long stretch of sidewalk flanked the culvert in a string of uneven slabs and separated the road from a garish three-story sitting on the corner lot. While I waited, I noticed the neat flowerbeds and freshly trimmed lawn that spread out before the shaded house; the grass had been mown in a checkerboard pattern, like a baseball field. In the center of the lawn, three concrete ornaments (two birdbath cherubs, eyes heavenward; an umbrella-ed toad with an upturned face) looked like outfielders who had lost the ball in the sun.

The Golden rose from his squat and resumed an eager pant. I hit the timer. We were off. We were making great headway: the boxy rhododendrons were a blur of fuchsia, the lipstick-red door of the yellow house beckoned us onward, and our heels kicked up stray gravel from the pavement. We were going to make it.

"Bitch!" was all we heard. It was high-pitched, nasally.

Normally, we wouldn't have stopped for anything, such was our intent on the yellow house (and breaking the all-time Wilshire Boulevard record), but the word registered somewhere

above the pounding in our ears and our heaving breath: some nasally, high-pitched bitch was calling *us* a bitch. The Golden wouldn't stand for it.

We skidded to a stop and turned around to find a stringy little brunette in a strapless, tangle-green sundress with one hand cocked on a bony hip, the other tensed with strain as she pointed an accusing forefinger in our direction. Her skin had tanned that unnatural shade that is both the tint and texture of an orange peel. She was clearly a transplant, a Nor'easter who'd blown into the Southern coast to churn the warm waters and rustle the palms with an inhospitable chill.

"Excuse me?" I said. The Golden snarled. We walked slowly back, toward this crooked little woman with scrawny, plum pit ankles. After sizing her up, I said, "Who you callin' *bitch*?"

She stood her ground, but we could tell she was worried. She was just on the patch of sidewalk at the corner of the checkerboard lot and pointed at the culvert. Every time she jabbed with her knobby finger, the shimmering pink peaks of her upper lip twitched in unison.

"I said, the next time your dog shits on my lawn, you're gonna pick it up!" Jab, jab, jab. Her falsetto voice sounded as if it came from somebody else. She gained confidence and pointed that finger at us again. "Bitch." It was quiet but potent.

The Golden and I were a mere twenty-second jog away. I tugged on the leash, and we started a quick sprint to where she stood. That got her going. She pulled one of those practiced fleeing moves—when the body is in swift motion well before the head—and retreated across her lawn toward the house, her pink lips the last things to jerk out of sight. She bumped into one of the cherubs as she bolted for the door. By the time we got to the corner, she was safely inside, peeking at us from behind pinched blinds in her living room.

Alone there on the corner, we stormed around in circles for a minute before deciding to continue the run, though the thrill of victory had since evaporated. But back on the road, we had only taken a few paces toward the yellow house when we decided we were too wound up. We headed home. A mile-and-a-half was still respectable.

When the Golden and I arrived at the complex, we bounded up the three flights to our apartment and burst through the door. The Golden collapsed by the A/C unit, but I headed for the cabinet beneath the sink. Emilio was making lunch and started to ask how the run went before he stopped, eyes wide, and asked what the hell was wrong with me. I told him I needed his bike, needed him to watch the Golden, and needed to know where the rubber kitchen gloves were. He gave me the gloves and stood in the doorway with a knife dripping mustard as I carried the bike down the stairs.

*I love you when you're crazy!* he called after me, his open hand on his hip. He was shirtless, shoeless, and wearing those corduroy cargo shorts that fit him so well.

I pedaled hard for Wilshire, bumped my way into the corner lot, past cherubs and toad, and rang the doorbell of the three-story. Surprisingly, the skinny brunette appeared in the crack of the door, looking at me sideways.

Calmly, I held my gloved hand out to her, the heaping pile not far from her nose. "Is *this* the shit you were talking about earlier?" I said.

She nodded, dumbfounded.

"I'm sorry for neglecting it the first time around. It won't happen again," I assured.

She thanked me, in a smallish way.

Later that evening, I asked Emilio to take me and the Golden for an evening drive in his red pick-up. We clinked beer bottles and let the ocean breeze coat us as we cruised with the

windows down, the Golden perched high on the wheel-well in the open truck bed. I simmered with anticipation as we turned down Wilshire. When we approached the three-story, I asked him to slow down while I pointed out the blackflies and gnats that swarmed the white mailbox. I was full of elbows and bursting laughter. Emilio was not. His face was wrinkled with misunderstanding, with an expression of unspoken criticalness that, in time, could be found lying beneath all his expressions.

Two years later, the Golden and I were fat again, Emilio and I divorced, he moved to Boston, and the three-story on the corner lot had burned to the ground. Faulty wiring. When they razed the charred remains, all that was left were two fire-kissed cherubs and the white mailbox, the red flag stiffly raised.



## Bernadette

Bernadette was dead. The sun was just up over the hills, a late spring swelling that was fast gathering heat. The woods, still dark and heavy with dew, cupped the back of the barn in a perfect black crescent. Bernadette lay on her side in the churned mud near the woods. Her legs were stiff, and her dark, wet eyes were clouded with flies.

There was no coyote sign, though the cow was too large for that kind of danger. Lying there lifeless, she looked more like an undressed side of beef than the gentle and milk-giving Bernadette. Flies rippled a black cloak from her shoulder to her mud-dipped tail. Atti shuddered as she felt the little sting.

She'd been letting the long slope of grass pull her happily toward the bottom field and the barn, until the sight of Bernadette's rigid body jumped out like a naked clothesline. Though Atti was quiet and still, her heart continued its sprinting, wild and kicking up heels. She chanced a glance at the black crescent of woods. As if the thing that caused the death might still be lingering.

It wasn't that she was scared of Bernadette's deadness. She had seen plenty of dead things—sick lambs frozen solid to the ground, blighted Chestnut trunks lying in rot next to their half-living stumps, a wrinkled grandfather filling up the satin blue of a coffin with his bifocals still on his nose. There was always that little sting at first, seeing an empty space where buzzing life used to be, but it wasn't scary.

Atti glanced around for Sugarbabe, but she didn't see the dog anywhere. She didn't bother calling for her. She wasn't that kind of dog. Last summer, when Atti's father had put

down their sweet-as-you-please cockapoo, D-Con—who'd caught the mange—and buried him under a Chestnut stump, he'd come home the very next day with Sugarbabe as a replacement. This new dog was a lanky, red-merled shepherd (good for the farm, he'd said) who'd bounced around the truck bed, from one wheelwell to another, with a long, sideways tongue and mismatched eyes. A year on their farm had not calmed her much, and as far as Atti could tell, the dog did little to help out. D-Con, at least, had let her pet his head and kept the mice out of the feed.

Not that there was much for a herding dog to do on their place these days. They'd sold what sheep hadn't been run over by pick-ups speeding down the newly widened and paved two-lane that skirted their place, and the flock of ducks—Indian Runners—were all cut down by one bad-luck bag of moldy feed. Maybe that's why Sugarbabe was a maniac. She was a working dog with no work to do. And because she was young, she sought work out for herself, rather than settling on boredom. She spent her days, and maybe nights for all Atti knew, running circles around the property, mouthing everything from sticks, rocks, and rusted tin cans to baby rabbits and moles (anything living or dead but a mouse), all of which she piled in small heaps on the porch steps. Little cairns of things to let you know where she'd been, but not where she was going.

Crazy as she was, Sugarbabe would be good company now, a comforting distraction while Atti poked around at Bernadette's dead body, trying to assess what killed her. But she was going to have to do it either way, with or without the dog.

Atti edged closer to Bernadette, her boots making a sucking sound in the mud. The body had not begun to stink, and she was glad for it. She crouched and laid a hand on Bernadette's black rump. It was cold, as she'd suspected, and lifeless. Only the cow's hoof prints—deep

postholes half-filled with last night's rainwater—were discernable in the surrounding mud. She felt guilty as soon as the thought entered her mind, but Atti could not deny thinking that there would be no more early mornings of milking before school.

Looking up from where she stood, the top pasture spread out on a steep slope, a wide, grassy hump that slanted down to the smaller pasture and the bonegray barn that was cupped by woods. When the ground was dry, Atti could start at the barbed wire gate at the entrance to the pasture and run down the narrow cow trail at top speed, delighting as her feet danced over a slicing path of rocks wedged in the dirt. Her father said they were quartz rocks and were hell on a plow. They reminded Atti of teeth—their sharp, white edges cutting up through the red dirt. Whenever she saw the rocks or even read the word *quartz* in a science book or magazine, she couldn't help the image and ran the tip of her tongue over her molars.

Atti started back up the trail, walking those happy steps in reverse, licking her teeth, her heart heavy as a creek rock baking in the sun. She trudged toward her family's little house beyond the barbed wire gate, where her father would be at the breakfast table, just sitting.

She had overheard her parents talking about this new routine of her father's—his quiet sitting, his growing need for absolute silence, which was harder and harder to come by with the birth of her little brother, Bayboy.

Atti had sat many times on the back porch steps, doing homework or shelling beans into a bucket and had heard their circle talk, how they avoided the words they didn't want to use, the labels they wouldn't apply to what all the sitting and the all quiet time meant. Her mother had questioned her father once about his sitting, his way of locking himself away in the bedroom without a sound—in a kind way, too, and not accusing—but never since. Her mother had questioned him, and he'd cried. With her ear Atti pressed to the back door, Atti had heard the

strained barking in his throat, a woody, wheezing sound much lower than his own voice. That time had been the only time he'd ever cried, as far as she knew.

He needed his quiet time most at breakfast and supper, and in the afternoons when he first came home from the jobsite. For the most part, Atti tried to avoid him, lest she chew her gum too loudly or walk too heavily on the floors of the little house. It was just her walk, she knew, but he always said it was akin to stomping.

Out-of-doors, Atti enacted everything she wished she *could* say. She would imagine her father's narrowed eyes and irritation as she dared to tell him off. When she was safely out of range, she'd smash her heels into the mud and say with balled fists and a hiss, *This is stomping for you, Dad. This is what stomping actually damn is!*

She looked at the house and felt the brooding quiet it held. She would have to tell him about Bernadette, of course, but she was dreading it. Sometimes his silence flashed to anger without warning, which made her a little afraid of him. Not that she thought he would *do* anything. He wasn't like *that*. But her mother was usually there and would interfere if he got to yelling or slamming cabinet doors. Today, her mother was gone to Georgia with Bayboy, his first trip to visit Aunt Landa. They wouldn't be back until Tuesday. And here it was Saturday.

Atti walked past the gnarled apple tree and the tractor shed and the greenhouse. Her heart slowed. She stopped near one of the rusted tractors before she reached the house and kneeled behind a big tire. Three or four tractors just like it dotted the expanse of their yard, each one marooned on islands of tall grass and wildflowers and housing the hum of papery wasp nests for engines. Parts tractors, mainly. She plucked a fat daisy and twirled it between her thumb and forefinger. She had never given any thought to the junked farm equipment in their big yard until recently, when she saw them through the window of the bus as it lurched off toward the middle

school. The redheaded Clink boy had pointed them out. *Why you need all them?* he'd said. She'd only shrugged.

She sat there thinking of how she would tell her father about the heifer. It was too early to judge his mood for the day. The news of Bernadette's death would surely ruin any good mood might she might have hoped for. And if he was already quiet and brooding? A dead cow would only be a fan to his fire, which was always burning a little. Even while he slept there were hot coals there, waiting for the sound of her low radio or her clinking of the milk pitcher in the fridge to burst into red flame. She pinched off lengths of the daisy stem with her thumbnail and practiced.

*Dad? Bernadette's dead.*

*Sir, our beloved milk cow has left us.*

*Um, Dad? Something's wrong with Bernadette.*

*Dad. You know Bernadette? You'd better come take a look.*

Sugarbabe found her squatting behind the tire and jangled up to her with a rusty pork-n-beans can in her mouth. The jagged lid was still holding on by an inch but had been pushed flush with the opening. A single dried bean, or something like it, was trapped in there. Trotting with it in the cradle of her jaws, Sugarbabe was a rattling her own tune. Atti took a swipe at the can when Sugarbabe got close enough, but the dog was too quick and skirted away, clanging, her nubbin of tail swishing a small smile.

Atti followed the clamoring dog to the house, where she heeled off her muddy boots on the porch. Sugarbabe looked as if she was going to wait at the steps, then blew past Atti instead through the bottom of the screen door, which was missing the screen. Sockfooted, Atti ran after the dog and slipped and slid across the hardwoods in the living room, until she had Sugarbabe by

the collar. She shoved the dog back through the square in the door and then closed the wooden one to keep her out. She scooted over Sugarbabe's damp trail with her socks, rubbing out the prints with her toes.

In the kitchen, her father was still sitting at the table with can of V-8 in his hand, staring past the window at the fields, which still weren't plowed. Atti stopped a few feet from him and cleared her throat.

*Dad?*

*Mmm.*

*Something's wrong, and I need you.*

*Something's always wrong, child.* He turned in his chair to face her, looked at her with one wrinkled brow. There was some lightness there in his eyes, a blue-burning pilot not yet ignited.

*It's Bernadette,* she said. The rest was caught in her throat.

He shushed her with his forefinger to his lip and looked around the kitchen. *What is that?*  
*Do you hear it?*

Atti recognized the sound. They leaned toward the window, Atti from where she stood, and her father from his seat. Sugarbabe trotted into view. The dog thrashed her head from side to side, the can clanging with each motion. It reminded Atti of a cartoon she'd seen. Porky Pig—the one where Porky is the diligent farmer and the bear in overalls wastes the summer sitting on the porch. When winter rolls around, all that's left for the bear and his dog to eat is one lonely bean, clanging in a can.

Her father leaned back in his chair and sipped at the vegetable juice. The skinny cans with the teardrop openings were piled in a black garbage bag on the back porch, waiting for her and her mother to cash them in. They'd bring five cents on the pound.

Sugarbabe was sniffing for something, her nubby tail working furiously. Out there in last summer's vegetable garden, the grass was taking over and the rodents were moving in. She was probably hunting moles or something else benign. After a moment, as if she had simply forgotten, the dog gave up what she was after and just flopped on her back in the growing grass, furiously working her upper and lower halves in opposite directions, her hind legs kicking at the air.

He father smiled. He chuckled softly and let out a little high-pitched whistle, to see if Sugarbabe could hear him all the way from inside the kitchen. She could. Mid-roll she heard it and twisted around to her elbows and looked right at them, one ear flopped open to reveal its pink folds.

*Some gal, isn't she?* her father said. He took a long sip and set down the juice.

*She's dead,* Atti said. She watched his eyes sort out the confusion, then flicker to life.

Atti waited outside. She heard him talking and wondered if he was calling her mother at Aunt Landa's. She edged around the house and stopped beneath the open kitchen window, listening for the news of her mother's early return. Would she come home because of Bernadette? Probably not, Atti decided.

She picked up scraps of the conversation—*I know baby*, and *I'm sorry* and *Tomorrow, maybe*.

He came out onto the porch with his light flannel on, even though it was warm.

*Was that Mom?* Atti said.

He spoke over his shoulder and kept walking. *It was a fella who works for me down at the site. I was after a backhoe for the cow, but he wasn't home. Let's go get this done.*

Atti didn't want to walk with him to the pasture. A wave of memory was washing over her—something long forgotten, some small, meaningless thing she had glimpsed once and allowed to sink that was resurfacing again in broad daylight. It bobbed in her recollection, glinting bit by bit.

The name *Sandy* penned neatly in her father's hand on an envelope. Inside, a dried daisy head and a Polaroid of him, dressed in his going-out shirt, the baby blue plaid one with mother of pearl buttons her mother had bought him. In the photo, he was standing with his hand on his hip and smiling brightly, as if whoever was taking the picture had just cracked a great joke. When she found it two summers ago, in the driveway by his truck, she did not recognize the *where* of the picture. A red couch and a low table were all that were visible in the darkened background. Below the picture on the rectangular white strip, his neat cursive again. *For you, baby!*

She had brought the envelope to him, skipping, with the picture in her hand. She was going to tell him he *looked like a million bucks*, some phrase she had been trying out since hearing it in a cartoon, but he'd snatched the Polaroid and the envelope from her instead and held her wrists tightly and said, *Where'd you get this?* before she could say a thing.

Her heart was waterlogged, the stone in it bobbing and thudding. She lingered away from him as he strode toward the tractor shed. The tractor inside sparked up, and soon he was backing it out, the huge tires cutting herringbone tracks in the soft dirt. He ground it into gear and turned the wheel, heading for the barbed wire gate. She knew he would be waiting on her to open it and let him pass through, but with no Bernadette to escape if she didn't shut it again, she didn't hurry. *Let him get off and open it himself for once*, she whispered.



She wanted her mother. She wanted to run off, though there was nowhere to run to. She wanted to burn a hole in the ground and disappear. She wanted, even, to see Bayboy and hold him close to her, her little brother she loved, in the way she could love him. Her mother and father were not *I love you* kind of parents, and that was okay, because she was not an *I love you* kind of daughter. Still, she wondered if she might have been, if she had been raised that way.

It was turning out to be a heavy Saturday. Only Saturday, which meant school was two days away. She had friends at school. A few. She fancied that she was a different person there. Atti the Student. She did well. Her teachers liked her. She got along alright. Mrs. White had been talking to her about high school, about the possibility of college in the future. They gave scholarships to minorities, she'd said.

Atti wasn't sure how to take that. How to love being who you are for the right opportunity, but hate who you are other times?

It was Adam who made the pineapple joke. In the cafeteria with her friends, fruit cocktail in one square of her brown, plastic tray. He reached over and grabbed the bright red cherry between his thumb and forefinger and popped it in his mouth and laughed. She had laughed, too, because he was the boy everyone hung on.

*Where are you from, again?* Adam was making small talk. *Some little island that no one's ever heard of?* Adam with the rows of perfect teeth, the bright white smile. Adam, nodding, then elbowing his friend, whispering something, laughing, laughing.

*Adam wants to make a bet,* said the friend, announcing it first to their table, then the next and the next. Half the class had heard.

She had felt the air change then, but she had not lost her smile. *Adam bets that Atti's...* Laughing, laughing. Contagious laughter, spreading. Adam's white teeth flashing when he opened his mouth wide, a laugh that he didn't cover up with his hand.

*Adam bets that Atti's pussy tastes like pineapple!*

She had laughed, too. What else could she do? She blushed with her friends.

*I think he likes you*, they said.

She swallowed the memory and plucked another daisy, tying the stem in little knots, scuffing her way down the narrow trail.

Her father was irritated with her when she finally reached the barn. She didn't run off, even though she wanted to. There was nothing out there but their own land for nearly a mile, and even then it only bled into the next farm, owned by another old man and his wife who kept a few horses.

Her father was an old man. At fifty-eight, he was much older than the fathers she'd seen who came to pick up their sons or daughters at school in the afternoons. Those fathers, she knew, were in their thirties and took their families on vacations to Myrtle Beach or Gatlinburg and worked in offices. Those fathers bought houses closer to the city and drove cars instead of trucks and didn't work construction and didn't give pictures of themselves to women named Sandy. Those fathers bought their daughters gifts from the mall—expensive hightops or charm necklaces—not fishing waders.

More than anything, Atti wished she could talk to her mother right then. Though they weren't that close, she yearned for her voice in a way that she hadn't before, in a way she couldn't explain.

He was standing on the tractor, uncoiling a length of thick rope. Sugarbabe lay still at the wood's edge, watching, panting, her mouth having forgotten the can.

*I thought the tractor didn't work, Atti said.*

*What?*

*That's what you said. Why the gardens aren't plowed yet. You said the tractor didn't work.* She was going to get burned, and she knew it, but she didn't care about fanning that fire, not now. *That's what you said, anyway.*

*Girl, who are you talking to?* His eyes were pinched. He let out a little huff of disbelief. *Grab the end of this rope.*

Its fat coils were gathering in a heap on the ground.

*What's the matter with you?* he said. *This cow got you that upset?*

Atti was silent. She clutched the rope's end in her hands.

*Say? Bernadette was a good cow and all, Atti, but she's an animal.* His voice softened. He tried at sympathy, explaining. It was awkward sounding, coming from him. *She wasn't that young, either, you know, she...well, she just got sick, I think. If you look at her eyes...*

He was going to tie Bernadette's legs and drag her somewhere, Atti realized. Drag her off to the trash heap, probably. Burn her. She tried to think of how else they'd take care of the body, if they could dig a hole that deep.

*And you've done a pretty good job taking care of her all these years, you know...*

Bernadette would scrape a trail over those quartz rocks. They'd chew her hide like teeth.

*We'll see about getting another cow, Atti, but for now, we just have to take things one step at a time...*

Atti looked up at him. *Who's Sandy?* It came out a whisper.

*What's that?* He stopped messing with the rope. He shook his head like he didn't hear, but his eyes flickered.

*Who's Sandy?* she said.

*Who's Sandy? Who's Sandy?* He pursed his lips, as if in thought. He straightened up for a moment and pinched his chin between his thumb and forefinger. *Hell, I don't know, do you?* *Sandy who?* He shrugged and took up the rope.

Atti dialed her Aunt Landa's number from the kitchen phone, but there was no answer. Her father was in his bedroom with the door closed. She imagined her mother shopping with Bayboy in tow, for baby blue baby outfits, baby blue booties. She turned on the television and turned it off again. The evening was cool, and the sun was slipping back behind the hills. She went to the porch and sat on the steps. She peeled off the foil of a V-8 and sipped it, her upper lip pushing through the opening. It was awful, she thought, the thickness of the tomato, the charred scent in the air.

Her father had cussed at the tractor when it broke down halfway to the trash heap. The towline had been strong, the knots secure. But when smoke billowed from beneath the steel hood of the tractor, he ground the gears until it shuddered and quit with a squeaking exhale of still blacker smoke that took a long time to rise. He'd come down off the spring-backed seat and tinkered for a minute under the hood, then threw a pair of big pliers at the engine and missed.

*Tomorrow*, he'd said, and tromped back toward the house, calling Sugarbabe, who ignored him.

Bernadette was still in the pasture, the towline knotted around her rear legs, her head flat on the ground but arched backward a little, like she was looking behind her, at the wide track her

body had made in its dragging. The tip of the cow's tongue poked out between her flat teeth, gray and stiff.

Atti set the V-8 down by her feet and noticed the little pile in the planter beside the steps. A couple of rocks, a chewed stick, a rusty can. Sugarbabe was off again, doing whatever she wanted.

Atti picked up the can, pried back the jagged lid, and pulled out, not a bean, but a little shard of quartz that had been trapped inside, the size of a molar. Atti put it in her mouth. She rolled it around with her tongue, feeling its edges and bit down on it once solidly, imagining it would break her own teeth if she did it hard enough, if she just kept biting.

She spit it out instead, into her palm with a *plunk*, and hurled it far into the front lawn. A few lightning bugs rose from the dark grass, blinking.

## Training

I was small and terrified of the space between the woods and the house. When I had to go out in the night to feed the farm dog in her pen, I would dump her food in the stainless bowl and slosh fresh water in her bucket. She would jump and paw at the fence, whimpering and begging for any attention, the slightest little care. I would deny her every night and pretend not to know what she wanted.

In the green dark I could hear footfalls, the impossible sounds of faraway drums, whispers. The trees were woven with thorns and kudzu, and somewhere in the thick of leaves, shadows breathed and bent, the shadows of evil things that watched me, whispered for me to edge closer.

Our land stretched and stretched. We had no neighbors. In the daylight, I was a shirtless warrior. I seined the creek for crawdads, trampled paths through hip-high ferns and leaped from slippery birch limbs with a machete raised high—all a part of my imagined training. I trained for battle, for some faraway sense of escape I hadn't yet figured out.

When night fell, I was hemmed in with fear. I would haul out the dog's food and water in metal pails, holding my breath as I jogged to the pen, a little ritual of protection. I would dump with my left hand and slosh with the right and say *Be good, now* over my shoulder and start the dead sprint back to the porch, the empty containers slapping my thighs. The dog would whimper and howl and I wouldn't care one bit. Beneath the yellow porch light, I would catch my breath. I was safe.

I still feel the shame of neglecting that dog. Maggie.

She was a digger. Eventually, the puppies came. I was careful to make sure they always had plenty of food and water in the pen. They were always in the pen, a small enclosure beneath

a tree in which the ground grew fetid and slick with excrement and rotting leaves. Maggie's puppies were joyous, and I was joyous when I was with them. I loved to lift the wire panel and let them all out—all eight or ten—and jog at a little pace, looking back all the while, begging them to chase me around the yard and pasture. I was small. I was never far from the ground.

I led the puppies in a rippling wave across the yard and into the pastures. When the moment was right, I would pretend to trip and fall. Then the puppies would scramble onto me with their puffball bodies of fine, mottled hair, hair that was more feather than hair. An owl chick's fluff. Their tiny tongues sought my ears, and I was ecstatic with their breath and their wanting.

Then a day came when the puppies were bigger and the bucket of water was filled to the brim with my careful nurturing. I left them just before dusk, satisfied with the way I tended to them, like a mother might. The one who looked most like Maggie scrambled for the water in the night and tipped itself into the bucket. It could not find its way back out. I found it the next morning, its blue eye open, its fur still feathery in the water.

The puppies barked. My father needed his sleep. He slept early in the evening and woke early in the morning. He could not tolerate loud noises because he was a hard worker who needed his sleep. My sister and I tiptoed around, scraping fun out of silences. The puppies did not know about tiptoeing. They barked and whined and barked and howled and cried. Their whole life was the pen.

Sometimes Maggie would perch on top of her doghouse, which my father had built with a roof made of real cedar shingles. When I saw her in this way, I would think Snoopy and Charlie Brown, but it was not like that. Maggie was not a sleepy dog resting in the sun. She needed to get away from the slick ground, the yapping puppies.

My father never had enough sleep, but he had a rifle. I never found out who had to bury the puppy who yapped the most, but it was not me.

I begged for the puppies to have some room. We had so much land, acres of woods and pasture and stream. They did not like the pen, but they had no training. Maggie was half wild herself. I remember the day my father and I drove in the old pickup to Maggie Valley, a forty minute drive out of town, to the house of the man who bred herding dogs. By that time our farm had all but collapsed, and we had nothing to herd. She was a tiny pup, mottled grey and inkblue. She sat in the floorboard, no bigger than an owl, looking up at me with one brown eye. Her other eye was blue, and it was not the blue of a marble or the blue of the sky or the blue of a deep pool, which is never blue, really. It was the blue of shallow ice beneath a gray sky, blue on the verge of cracking.

What did she see with that eye, through the mesh of the pen?

Her puppies needed room, like the eye needed room. This is why she perched on the roof of her house. For perspective. When the puppies came, I begged for them to have some room. I would let them out, to chase me, to chase each other. I would let them out. I was not in the truck when the puppy was crushed to death. I let them out. My father drove the driveway in reverse, the puppy sleeping behind the rear tire.

Maggie eyed the road. She needed room, so she sought the road. She would not run away, though sometimes I wished it. At times I urged her to take off for the woods, but she always came back. She had long since been trained to stay. She needed room but found the road.

My father dug the hole, cussing at the loss. *What a shame* he said. *A damn shame. Crazy speeding drivers.* I don't know where he buried her because I was not allowed to see. There is no marker on her grave.



PART III. GU HAN.

## Better Than No Mother

*Maulekna un baban nana, ki tai nana. (It is better to have a bad mother than no mother.)*  
*--Chamorro proverb based upon the myth of "The Mermaid"*

Atti is thirteen, and the ocean is breathing. It breathes a lover's breath on her nape, warm and heavy with salt, perfumed with nightfall and gardenia. She needs to fill the woven bag with dried coconut shells, as her mother has instructed. But Atti has drifted from the sickle of sand into chestdeep water. There, she is drawn beneath the surface, dipping below two lungfull at a time, listening, listening. In the dampened drum of the water, she listens.

When the sun slips halfway into the pocket of the bay, Atti rises from the water and gathers her sopping hair with both hands, lifting its heaviness to expose the stretch of skin between her neck and the curve of her shoulder. She wants to feel the breath there. She wants to feel the sensation it brings—of turbulence, of something that is not her blood, swirling beneath the surface.

Twilight glints behind the silhouette of coconut trees bending over the bay, humming for Atti to stay awhile. The twilight hums to entrance. It is a low murmur, a lasting glow that sings to keep her, a bright vibration, calling her to linger while darkness settles around her like thick ash.

But Atti knows the dangers of darkness, and though the slanted sky is fat with clouds, burnt in the evening sun, she will not linger by the sea, though she longs to. She has forgotten the coconut shells. There is not enough time to fill her bag. Her feet find the broken halves of one small coconut, half-buried in the sand. They clack softly in the bag as she hurries down the beach and into the jungle, toward home.

Her mother judges the emptiness of the woven bag before Atti has crossed the threshold. Her mother's eyes are hot embers that burn through the woven bag, exposing the meager slivers

of nutshell where they lay. Now the bag in the crook of Atti's arm feels empty as air—smokewoven—its tendrils dissolving beneath her mother's gaze.

Atti is planted just inside the doorway, dripping. She waits for her punishment. Rivulets of saltwater stream from the ends of her hair. They seek the small cleft between her breasts. They divide into fingers spread around her navel. They curve inward along her thighs and spill down her curved calves until they pool at feet. Atti lowers her head, tracking their course. Her skin shivers in their wake. The woven bag slips from her arm to the clasp of her hands.

There will be no fire in the oven. Atti's mother inhales sharply. A faint tapping from the back of the small house brings Atti's godmother into the front room, where Atti is soaking the floorslats. She takes the bag gently from Atti's hands, resting one of her own on Atti's wrist.

"Swimming Atti," she says, in a voice small and polished as pearls, "I see you bring the ocean in with you."

Atti tries to hide her smile. Her mother's eyes are still burning, but she says nothing. Godmother winks and fans her hands toward Atti as if to say, "Shoo, shoo." Atti does not hesitate. She hurries to her room and the sleeping mat made of woven palm leaves.

That night, Atti plunges into dream.

The ocean calls her. She kicks down past the coral ledge, down beneath the water until the sun is a blurred disc, down toward a slice of cool current, and deeper, until sunlight is sliced into dim slats that wobble in the gloom. Weightless. And she is fading—from the curve of her neck down to the curves of her pointed feet, translucent. Hair in inky billows. Black smoke turned liquid.

From the deep, an enormous yellow cloud is coming. A cloud of flat, striped yellowfish blooms upward, undulating. It is at once a swirling singularity, barely fragmented into is million

swimming parts. Beneath her, it pulses closer, and when it is about to press at the tips of her toes, it opens, revealing a pocket the size of Atti. Silently, the fish have come upon her, but once enveloped, she can hear their seething. They are cloudwhirl, swirling—a twist of spaded yellow leaves caught in a curling wind or blackbeaked songbirds circling greenblack boughs. Yet each flat face in its revolution about her body flashes a beaded eye. They watch her.

Atti is breathing, though there is only water. They do not touch her. There is only water and the yellowfish dart, a mass of cloud trailing transparent ribbons of bubbles, binding her without touching. Atti is the eye, the calm center of flashing fins, a billion bubbles fizzing, the size of sand. The friction of fine scales simmers the water around her, hisses in her ears. They do not touch her. The hiss rises and circles, rises and swirls, but they do not touch her. Her skin is alive with finflick, their fleeting wake, their whirling whispers, but they do not touch her. All is water and wash—above, below, without, within. She feels the flush of their trailing wake, ribbons of water circling, circling, but they do not touch her. She is the center, growing pale in their pulsing cloud, a yellow cloud shifting beneath the reef, now moving downward, from where it rose, downward, contracting in the cool current. A yellow cloud encasing Atti that eclipses the sunslats, a cloud that is disappearing down the green current, deeper, deeper. Down over lip of the trench.

When Atti wakes, her hair is still damp. She is parched, the taste of salt thick on her tongue. The rooster crows beneath her window.

Her mother is slicing starfruit on a low table. The small mound of grated coconut is flecked with bits of brown shell. Her mother has softened, her disappointment washed away in the night. Godmother smiles.

"Atti, will you collect the eggs," her mother says. "And then go out and gather the palm leaves. We will dry them and scrape them with a sickle of oyster shell."

Atti collects her woven bag, the bag she and her mother wove together, her first weaving. She ruffles the hens in their boxes, stealing the speckled eggs two at a time with each hand. She places them in the wooden bowl on the low table for her mother and sets out for the jungle and the palmgrove.

The morning sun rises hot then hotter, and soon the jungle is sweating. Atti sweats, too, her arms heavy with leaves. Her hair clings. But she senses the clearing through the palmgrove, a little lit path. And there, rustling the sheaves of green is the cooling ocean breeze.

She has been gone for hours before her mother and godmother come searching. "Atti," they cry through cupped hands, "Atti, Atti." Her mother is afraid—of the deep jungle, of the sharkmen, of the wrenching tide.

Through the clearing, godmother spots her. Atti is swimming under the sun, ecstatic and splashing in the calm water of the bay. The woven bag lies empty on the sand.

Her mother is exasperated. Her thoughts are in her throat. "Always, she is swimming, swimming. She would make a finer fish than a daughter." These words, once loosed, braid into a wide net and fling across the sea to where Atti swims.

Godmother tries to snag the net with a reaching hand, but it slips by. "Leave her spirit!" she cries, "the part of her that belongs to me!"

Her mother is reaching for her with arms stretched toward the sea. But Atti feels a heaviness about her in the water. A slight tugging. It pulls on her toes. Her head is thrown back, her eyes cast at the sun.

The ocean's slick surface is on her earlobes. Below, she feels the effervescent hiss of bubbles. Her legs are bound together in tight, invisible ribbons. Atti is turning and turning, a glinting iridescence spreading beneath her. Touching her. Tugging. Wrapping. She feels the swarm of tiny bubbling mouths kiss her skin, embedding golden scales.

## Whitney

The mouse was missing: hair, skin, muscles, organs, eyes, tail. What was left, perfectly preserved in a small glass bottle wedged in the black soil, was everything else: bones, ligaments, cartilage, toenails, and two shriveled turds. Mostly, I was interested in the bones.

I found the brown bottle half-buried behind Atti's house, where the long grass of her yard edged the jungle. I was holding it up to the sunlight like an ancient artifact, being careful not to disturb its contents, when she came running out of her back door, barefoot and toting a straw bag. I lowered the bottle to chest-level, offering it to her like a gift.

"A bottle," she said. She pinched the underside of my arm and flipped up the back of my skirt. "Big deal, Whit-ney." My name was a puzzle to her. She once asked me its meaning. I had no idea.

I raised the bottle higher and shook my head. She was wearing her white sun dress, strapless with a blood stain on the hem—the slip of her palm on the coconut grater in her mother's kitchen. Her hair was long, parted on the side, straighter than mine.

"Something else," I said. "An animal, a rodent, I think. A mouse."

"A *rodent*," she said. "You're so..." She was curious, though, and bent to peer into the tiny opening.

"Smart?" I said. "I know."

She shoved me, laughing. Then she remembered the bottle and drew both hands to her mouth in shock, one pressed tightly over the other, a child's expression of the accidental.

We were both children then, but the fabric of our childhood had begun to stretch, to put pressure on the seams. I had known her for three months. Her small breasts punched up the white ruffles of her dress.

“It’s fine,” I said, squinting at the tiny skeleton. “We should take it out anyway, to examine it.”

“Don’t be brodie,” she said. She rolled her eyes. “You’ll ruin it.” She reached for the bottle, smiling, only wanting it because it was important to me.

“What’s brodie mean?” I said. I backed away from her outstretched hands.

“It means you’re too white to know that *brodie* means dumb.”

Her cheeks were round, flawless. The tip of her tongue emerged between the press of her teeth. She reached out and placed both hands on my hips, teasing. She gently tugged and pressed on my hip bones, testing my balance.

“I still love you, though, Whit-*ney*,” she said. “Now hand it over.”

This was how she liked to tease, laying bare the differences between us. She was brown; I was not. She was bilingual; I was not. Guam was her home; my home was any military base in any country. Nowhere. Once, she had said the same about the island. “But this is permanent,” I had told her. “The island’s not going anywhere.” “Yeah,” had been her reply. “That’s why it’s called ‘The United Kingdom of Guam,’ isn’t it? You know it all, don’t you?”

I put the bottle down in the grass and chased her around the yard. More than anything, I wanted to catch her. If I did, we would lock arms and pressed our foreheads together. We would twist this way and that until we were on our knees, tumbling to the ground. She would pin me on my back, holding my wrists, her white dress fanning out around us. Her face would be inches from mine, her hair shielding us like a curtain. Then we would be perfectly still in that moment of uncertainty, searching each other’s eyes. For permission. For a reason. At the last minute,



she might let go, rolling away and jumping to her feet, brushing long strands away from her damp forehead.

But her mother was calling us from the front door instead.

“Atti, Whitney! Taotao manu? [Where are you?]”

We scooped up our things before she came looking and ran toward the beach. We would play that scene out later anyway, a dozen more times, the distance between our mouths shrinking until it was nothing.

On the northern end of the island, my father sat in a cold box of an office at the air force base, drawing maps in fine, black ink. His careful grids stretched over the brief length of mountain and jungle—strategic locales, munitions caches, the deepest off-shore ports. He worked. Except on Sundays.

We first met Atti and her mother at Mass. Atti and I avoided each other at the back of the church while my father propositioned her mother with the babysitting spiel I had heard too many times. I fingered the base of the wooden statue of Our Lady of Lourdes and pretended not to care.

Atti’s mother fed me, shooed me from her kitchen with a flyswatter, and made me take my shoes off before entering her house. Otherwise, she didn’t talk much.

“She doesn’t want to get too close to you,” Atti told me. We were lying on our backs, head-to-head in a shallow pool down at Tamuning Beach, listening to each other with our ears submerged. “She knows you’ll be leaving soon.”

The salt water hollowed-out our words, made it sound like we were talking into tin cans.

“I love you,” I said. “I want to stay here forever.”

“What?” she said. “This isn’t working. My ears are full.”

The sun threatened to disappear into the ocean, and we hurried to the outcrop of rocks where we stashed our treasures. Atti wanted look at them again before we made the slow march back to her house: the abandoned shell of a coconut crab we filled with white sand, a pile of dried hibiscus petals wrapped in seaweed, the husked halves of two coconuts strung as bikini tops, the brown bottle full of bleached mouse bone.

“How do you think it got in there?” I said. We never tired of this game—guessing the ways a mouse finds its way into a glass bottle, like a toy ship.

“It starved to death,” she said. “It was trapped in that tiny space, and it starved.”

I put my head on her shoulder and told her I would miss her.

“You don’t know anything about me,” she said. “You don’t even know what my names means. You never asked.” She looked me full in the face, unflinching.

“A trick,” I said. “It means someone who plays tricks.”

Atti picked up the crab shell, the petals, the coconut husks, and walked to the water. She dug at the wet sand with her toes and stared far off at the horizon. She didn’t turn to look me or say a word before she tossed everything into the rising tide.

Behind her, I picked up the bottle high over my head, let it catch the low note of the breeze across its lip, and smashed it hard on the rocks.

I wanted it to stand for something, to break apart in finality, to mean more than it did.

### Just Because I Was Sleeping Does Not Mean I Dreamed It

I have impossible memories. Creation. My brother cleaving a snake in the bedroom. I remember both, though I slept.

The bedroom is on the second floor of the A-Frame by the sea. The second floor is a half-floor, pinched by the peak of the A. I sleep in this pinched space, on the floor beside my parents' bed. It is hot. The windows are flung wide to the ocean air. Insects swarm. The windows are screened.

The insects tap the mesh of the screens, searching for a rift. They tap with their mouths and with their feet. Our screens are flawless. The insects tap and tap but do not get in.

A snake gets in. Through the back door. A brown snake slithering among thousands of other brown snakes, overtaking the island, devouring flightless birds. The U.S. Navy brought them. A small gift.

When our island was created, I was a sleeping bird, not yet flightless, watching from above. Our island was created by a brother and a sister.

The snake seeks the pinched room and my pinchable cheek.

Watchfulness is a primary characteristic of heroism. My brother is watchful above all else. He knows the snake seeks my brown cheek. If I am to be saved from the snake's poison, it must be my brother who saves me. My parents are drunk or weeping. They possess nothing but sorrow. My brother possesses watchfulness plus a machete.

He chooses cleaving over decapitation.

This is called panache in the moment of heroism. Now the snake possesses a forked head *and* a forked tongue. Panache is a French term, though we are not French. We are barely

Americans. We are islanders possessed by America, living among snakes. Among watchful brothers.

## Guåhan

### I. The Beginning. Before Time

There is a crack in the ocean. Deep beneath the flake of reef, beneath the darting parrotfish and unicornfish and slippery eel, the earth gapes, an open mouth. Deeper still, past the lips of the trench, the black throat of the earth lies empty, a hollowness where no light can reach. Yet thirty-six-thousand feet above, a glinting string of islands—and in the middle, Guåhan floats in the sun.

How was it made? Atti made it, with her brother, Puntan. Brother and sister existed in the void, the nothingness of nothing. They played and fought as siblings do. They were neither bored nor idle, because they had each other.

Atti pulled on Puntan's long, black hair. Puntan pinched the underside of Atti's strong arm, and then ran away, smirking. They kicked at each other with bare, round toes and wrestled and laughed.

One day, Puntan grew tired, and a strangeness came over him. He closed his eyes and became quiet and still. In the nothingness of the void, even the sound of his breath was swallowed, so he listened in the silence for the small sound coming from within.

His soul spoke to him in a whisper. From a round space deep inside him, the void of his own body, his soul formed lips and a throat and spoke to Puntan and told him he would soon die. Puntan heard this from his soul and did not deny it.

When he told the news of his coming death to Atti, she was beside herself with anguish and worry. Without her brother, she would be alone. Without her brother, the nothingness would surely close in around her, and even her own soul would not keep her company.

“Do not worry, sister” Puntan said. “You will not be alone. You will make a world of my body. You will live in this world, and you will never be without me.”

Atti understood, as she was equal to her brother in knowledge, wisdom, and strength. In the quiet of the void, they sat together, hand-in-hand, and Puntan spoke the words of his soul. Atti remembered the words and promised to do as Puntan asked.

When her brother at last drew his final breath, Atti collected his body in her arms and chanted even as she cried.

*--The skies from your last breath, sweet brother.* She sang and drew the air from his lungs and created the clouds.

*--A sun and moon from your eyes.* She plucked each of Puntan’s bright eyes from his head and cast them beyond the clouds, high into the void.

*--Rainbows to color the skies, my brother.* Atti pulled free his eyebrows and placed them among the clouds.

*--The earth below, ridged with mountains, dimpled with valleys.* She laid her brother’s back gently at the bottom of the void and created the land.

*--A deep ocean surrounding, Puntan, dark as the void.* She gathered his black tresses and created the depths of the swirling sea.

And the land and the sea remembered Puntan’s breath and the beating of his heart, and night and day patterned themselves to the rhythm.

Atti surveyed what she had created and entered the sea. She walked to a string of small islands that she had placed under the shining sun of Puntan's eye.

From the sea around the most beautiful of these islands sprang ocean grasses and algae, fanfish and sea cucumbers, whales and white sharks. Up from the island's soil sprang crooked-limbed pandanus and arching coconuts, flowering starfruit and ifil trees. Ghost crabs scuttled across the sand, and singing Reed Warblers and swooping Flying Fox took flight through the canopy.

Seeing the paradise that she had created from her brother's body, Atti smiled and sat at the edge of the surf, letting the ocean spill over her feet. In the rhythm of the surf, she heard her brother's breath, and this made her happy. But there was no one to share her happiness with.

She understood, then, what she must do. She stood, lifted her head to the shining sun, and walked into the ocean from the southern tip of the island. She crouched slowly, tucking her chin to her chest, and turned herself to stone.

The churning sea crashed over the rock formed from Atti's body, and pieces of stone that broke away and were carried to shore became the people of Guåhan, the Chamorro, all of whom contained Atti's spirit. *Guåhan. We have.*

## II. Contact. 1670

Someone had to put it on a map, so Magellan was no big surprise. He had a boat, that was *his* thing. Of course, it depends on whose history you want to hear. I find it best to trust the brown historians on this one. They have less reason to lie. Better yet, trust the brown women, who have nothing left to lose.

Magellan landed on the shores of Guåhan, stinking of scurvy and sawdust and Europe, brandishing a steel sword and a white, homesick penis.

“¡What a Paraíso!” he thought, just before ordering the decapitation of seven Chamorro men and burning down their homes. “Now where’s the pigs and women?”

Guåhan has no pigs.

I am being unfair. Old Magellan probably asked, quite politely, if he might re-supply his three ships. The natives granted his request, and he honored the beautiful string of islands in which Guåhan happily sits with the name Las Islas de las Velas Latinas, after the sails of Guåhan’s swiftest boats. Then the Chamorro men boarded his ships, taking what they could find. Magellan had refused to pay for his supplies. He renamed the lovely string Las Islas de los Ladrones. Island of Lateen Sails? Island of Thieves? Magellan wouldn’t stay long either way, so it didn’t matter much. But he had made contact. His heavy bootprints were all over the place, and soon, others followed.

Here’s how it happened.

Diego Luis de San Vitores came to save the Chamorros, first with gifts of iron and clothing (given to Chief Quipuha), then with Bibles, crosses, and a new name. He was a pious man. A basilica was built, Chief Quipuha was converted, and the lovely string of islands became *Islas Marianas*. (Oh, little string, like shimmering pearls, how easily you slide into the velvet pocket of a Spanish queen).

Catholicism was a stealthy thing that crept over the island, appearing here and there like suggestions, small hints of salvation whispered into Chamorro ears, until it felt at home. Once it crossed the threshold of thatched houses set upon latte stones, it denounced ancient traditions and elbowed its way beyond the front door—into kitchens, bedrooms, and graveyards.



For the ancients, there is no heaven or hell. Puntan and Atti were no Gods, just a man and woman with power, caring for each other as brother and sister. This is why the Chamorros keep their dead near. The maranan uchan, the skulls of our loved ones, are kept in baskets and placed among the rafters, for protection and good will. Respects are paid.

Vitores buried Quipuha near the basilica. What did he think would happen? There are no lovely words to describe it.

So here is Atti now. Fifteen years old, the daughter of Dahi and Man'oga, whose own head is lost among the waves and will never find its way to our basket. The women are becoming all of what is left. Our village of Yigo sighs with a woman's breath. This is no time to be in love.

Mama tells me that it is not love, anyway, and that I should not say such things. She tells me I am confused, traumatized, growing up. What would my father think? We have no word for this kind of love on our island, and Mama says, simply, it is "sisterly." She is careful to watch us, though, when Tasi and I are shredding coconuts on the back steps or making oyster shell necklaces. She peers through her weaving or chopping and pokes her head out the window, asking questions she already has answers to.

Tasi is not my sister, though we have always been friends. Her fingers are slender and delicate. She can carve the roundest of holes in the center of her shells, chewing her lips with the effort. When she is done and holds one up to test its symmetry, it is me she sees through that perfect space.

I can not forget that our island is at war, but when I press my own fingers to the center of the dangling shell against my chest, I am reminded of the sea and the tide that always takes away what it has first brought to shore. At night, I walk into the jungle and ask the ancestors, the Taotaomo'na, to rid the island of Spaniards. So far, they have not answered, but I will continue

my chanting, even when the soldiers come to our village and tell us that our families are to take surnames, in the Christian way.

Our people have only ever needed one name to identify ourselves. Dahi, *friend*. Man'oga, *one who is snared*. Atti, *one who plays tricks*. Tasi, *the sea*.

I tell my mother that if we are forced, we should be known as Taitano, *without land*.

### III. America, Japan, America. 1944

My nanan biha is dying. We sit on overturned buckets outside the concrete house, watching the sun bleed into the treeline. Her legs are swollen and blotchy. She squints at me with cataract eyes, resting her thick arms on her knees. The concrete house is shaded in a copse of breadfruit trees and will be turned over to the lenders soon enough. She signed the reverse mortgage years ago. Doctor bills. She knows I will leave for the mainland when she is gone.

When she speaks in English, her accent is warm and rhythmic, yet punctured, like the sound of a quick pumping heart that has a slow, pinprick leak.

“Soon it is happening,” she says, nodding.

I listen. If I listen long enough, she will find a length of thread and tug on its end with a round thumb and forefinger, teasing it until it runs out. If I am silent and follow it to its end, I will see how it unravels. Later, I will remember its way, and imitate it.

“The doctors, they tell me, Maria you don’t eat so much, it will kill you, these diabetes. I say but I love it, I love it, the kelaguin binadu, the eskabeche, the kadon monnok. If they kill me, let me die with a full stomach.”

Her breath is heavy. Her earlobes are plump and brown. She smiles.

“Ai’ adai, I don’t know. You know, when I go, Atti, I want you to make sure they don’t take these flowers. Some of the bougainvillea I started from tiny sprouts.”

She shows me with a measurement of her thumb and pinky.

“These hibiscus, oh, you know they are so much to be caring for them, you have to be careful and not put too much fertilizer, a’ha, that’s how they get small, you know, I mean they don’t get big, like plates. You know, ‘cause they are big, like the dinner plates. Your mama used to love the hibiscus in her hair. Oh, I tell her she is vain, for the boys. Everyday before school, I am packing her, plus your aunties’, titiyas for lunch, you know. That’s all we had, the titiyas, and I call for her. I say Catalina, don’t be forgetting your titiyas! And you know where she is? Your mama is in my garden picking the small hibiscus for her hair, and I tell her I pinch her if she keeps doing it because how will they be growing, you know, big like plates if she is always picking them?”

She pauses and squints out beyond the white buckets filled with potted flowers, so many they have overtaken the yard. She used to sell them at the market, lifting these heavy buckets that spill over with red hibiscus onto a two-wheeled cart. She begins to sing in the old language, and I listen, though I don’t understand.

“Atti? You don’t understand?” she says. “Ai’ adai, for heaven’s gracious. It’s from your living on the mainland. Your father just is wanting you to speak the English, only the English. When you go back, you tell him he did a good job. No one knows you are Chamorro when you go back. Just here we are knowing. I don’t know. Is it cold there in North Carolina? It’s cold there. Well, I tell you something before you go back, Atti. I show you how to sing the Tsamorita, the old Chamorro songs. You need to know how it’s done, the rhyming. My mama and aunties and sisters and me, we would sit around while we are doing the cooking or, you know, the

washing. We sing the Tsamorita, also it's called Kantan Chamorita, which is, you have to be smart to sing it because you make it up, you know, and it's like this. Four lines, dos e tr3s lines, two and three lines, they are rhyming, at the end. Okay, so last line is finished. You take the last word, the finished line, and it is the rhyming word for next one, two and three lines. I think, Atti this is how. It's hard to remember."

She sings. She sings and sings and I listen, unknowing, hearing only the punctured rhythm, quick but warm.

I do not have her words, but I have words. Words to tell my biha's story. My story.

When we count, it is not in our way.

Whose tongue then, give numbers their shape?

Which Spanish man, his breath on the nape

Of my mother's mother's mother's frame?

Uno, dos, tr3s, cuatro, cinco, seis.

In English, we are taught words for the same.

Thank Henry Glass, Confederate by name,

For saving us, again, from our own kind.

Guåhan, *we have*, Guåhan, we have not.

Stars and stripes form Guam from the rind.

Lovely little string, a fortunate find

Impressed with the States, United, in bold.

So we call it Guam—flat, America's wealth.

Capital, a shell, to be bought and sold.

Its traded worth, ten-thousand fold

The number of Chamorros shrinks to none.

Then the claim of the Japanese

December ten, nineteen-forty-one.

Call Guåhan Omiya Jima of the Rising Sun.

A cluster of bombs bloom red on the sand.

Chamorros with white ribbons

Cinched by Japan's Imperial hand

Now slave to the rice paddy, our land

Taken, our tongues taken, left with dust.

Spotted dogs creep from the jungle edge,

Tongues wet with roadside lust

And feed upon Chamorro livers, thighs, while blood's rust

Bakes beneath equatorial sun.

In Manengon, ten-thousand Chamorros

Shit in the Ylig River, waiting to be undone

By bayonet, grenade, katana sword, machine gun,  
Errant blooming bomb of America's liberation.

If a prayer escapes my lips,  
Let it be for mercy of amputation.  
The long arm of America's occupation  
Would as easily smother as liberate you.

#### IV. America, America, America. 2008

In Montana, I make jewelry, display pieces not meant to be worn—necklaces and bracelets that dangle medallions, shells, lead weights, chunks of pipe, artillery casings, bones. I string them with braided wire cable, lengths of steel chain, rope dipped in caked silt and mud. They are meant for a giant's neck, for monstrous wrists and ankles. Weight is what I'm after. Weight and mass. Adornments that take up so much space they can not be ignored.

My father will die having never seen them. He does not understand the transition of my life into such things. To him, I have changed into something I am not. What happened to young Atti? What happened to the young teacher of children?

I think, "I was displaced from my home." Home is Guam, and this is what I remember: the bend of coconut trees over the bay, the spindly fingers of the medicine man mixing a poultice for a wound, the shadow of sea squirts in a shimmering pool, my grandmother's face. When people ask me, *Have you been back?* it is this short list that comes to mind, all that I remember. I am eight thousand miles away. I have not been back.

It pains my father to speak to me. When I saw him last, he distracted himself with memories. Living in the past, he can see me as he wishes. A good girl. A good American English teacher, with a good head on her shoulders. Lovely daughter with the exotic look but lacking any accent. Atti Smith.

“So you’ve found a place?” he said.

“Out West,” I said.

“Mountains or beach? You always did like the beach. Used to run around half naked, couldn’t force you to put a shirt on. We had to catch you just to get some underwear up over your little brown bottom.” He reached to adjust his glasses. His hands were pale, sun-spotted, older than I remembered.

“So you remember Racquel? She’s an artist, too,” I said. “Sculptor.”

“When we moved to the States, you didn’t change a bit. Still shirtless when it was fifty degrees out. Liked to worry your mother to death.”

“Guam is part of the States, Dad,” I said.

“Territory. A territory, my dear.”

When he met my mother, he was a pilot, stationed in Yigo.

Racquel and I met at the high school where I taught, back in North Carolina. She was a visiting artist giving a lecture during senior convocation. Things happened in the usual way. Eyes, smiles, numbers exchanged. And then the cross-country move.

It caused a stir. My father vowed to disown me. *No daughter of his*, etc., etc. He’s getting old, though, so he has no choice but to let me come creeping back in. Who will take care of him if he doesn’t? My mother left him long ago, moved to the next state over.

Their meeting was military-related, of course. (Right after they ask *Where're you from?* what comes next is *Father in the military?* Air Force. *Thought so. He's white, then?*) My mother's from Hagåtña. They call it Agana now, the *a's* flat as dollar bills.

Once, at the car dealership near my father's house, the salesman looked at me while going over the papers I was to sign and said, *Hawaiian?* When I raised an eyebrow, he said, *Just looks like you got a little somethin' in you, is all I meant.* I wished Racquel were there. She is never shamed into silence.

The flag of Guam, U.S.A., boasts as its emblem the shape of a slingstone, an ancient weapon. Racquel has become interested in carving them out of limestone.

"How much do you think they should weigh?" she said.

"More than a fist," I said. "Less than a coconut."

When she is done, they will sit in a gallery window somewhere, or on a pedestal. The transparent label nearby will read, *Chamorro Slingstones*. Someone will buy them, put them on a fireplace mantel, and point them out to guests at a dinner party.

My father does not want me to move. It is out of love, I say, but he won't hear it. What do I know of love, he asks.

I love Racquel more than is necessary. Enough is sufficient, but I know I have given myself up to her. Mornings, we sit across a tiny card table and drink coffee with too much cream and talk about who we are.

"Artista types," Racquel is fond of saying.

"We're just women who make stuff," I say.



We laugh and reheat our half-filled cups in the microwave. Racquel has a way of saying, *Uh huh* with her hips. Side to side, *Uh huh*. My father met her once, under the pretense of *friend*. He gets it. He just doesn't get that I get it, too.

"Remember taking those standardized tests?" I say, our coffee steaming again.

"Uh huh," says Racquel.

"Were you an 'Other?' " I remember exactly how it looked. Faint green print, the color of bleached seaweed, the paper stained pink and brown with cheap eraser.

Caucasian? No.

Black? No.

Hispanic? No.

Asian?

Asian?

No.

American Indian? No.

Other. A heavy, dark mark.

"I always lied," she says. "Tell them what they want to believe. White."

After administering the last round of end-of-grade tests, I was "let go" from the high school where I taught. Technically, I resigned, but there was pressure. My relationship with Racquel. Racquel reminded me that we were dealing with North Carolina, not California. One out of three trucks here boast rebel flag bumper stickers, or in some cases, actual rebel flags. I reminded her that it doesn't matter where we are. We will never be what we are not. At least in Montana, there's exposure. The wide open.

I wanted to stand up on that last day, in front of my students, to tell them the reason I was leaving. In the end, I could not form the words. I am guilty of that, I know. Making jewelry is my penance. If I make enough, it will fill a gap, plug up that void created out of shame.

In our small house at the foot of the mountains, Racquel and I collect postcards. Most of them are reprints of works of art—sculptures, paintings, photographs. We find them in gift shops and galleries and tack them to the ceiling above our bed. I like to write on the backs of the ones I buy, short little notes to Racquel that she will find someday when we move again.

My favorite is the one I found in a random craft store down by the Intercoastal. The caption in the upper left corner on the back reads: *Michael Heizer's Double Negative. This notable earthwork is a sculpture created on the eastern edge of the Mormon Mesa, northwest of Overton, Nevada, 1969.*

On the front is an aerial photograph of the work, which spans a quarter of a mile. From above, a framed patch of red mesa. The mesa is a face—her open mouth a deep, gaping hole created by landslide and erosion—her lower jaw missing. It has been this way for thousands of years. What is new is the trench, carved in a continuous line across one side of her remaining upper lip to the other, spanning the gulf of her mouth, the work of bulldozers and heavy machinery.

It is shocking and violent. It is beautiful, too. Simple and absurd. I turn the postcard over and scrawl my message, in runny, blue ink. *Racquel. We are trenches, speaking to each other across this gap.*

Who digs trenches in a desert? Who takes away what is there and calls the nothingness *something?*

In Racquel's studio, a perfect slingstone sits amid a small pile of chiseled debris. It fits neatly in the cupped palm of my hand. I will string all of them on a giant coconut fiber necklace when Racquel is done. It will take thirty, maybe forty, to inscribe the history of Guåhan I will write into their polished skin. I will start from the beginning, before time.